



RESEARCH PAPER

A Glimpse of China-African Union Economic Relations during 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The ever-prospering China-African Union (AU) economic relations are the outcome of their long-term interaction. The dawn of 21st century marked a significant boost in this relationship with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Chinese Presidents Hu Jin Tao (2003-2013) and President Xi Jinping (2013-) preferred to follow a multilateral approach towards African continent and interacted with AU through inter-regional organizations which policy radically transformed the level of Chinese penetration into the continent. The Agenda 2063 of AU has also been designed to maximize the benefits from China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) of 2013. As a consequence of integrated efforts from China and the AU for the economic development of the continent, the collective economy of Africa had reached at a magnificent amount of \$3 trillion in 2023. In this scenario, the current study, while reviewing policy documents and available literature, explores the nature of China's enhanced cooperation with Africa through regional and multilateral organizations such as the AU, FOCAC and NEPAD. It elucidates how China and AU had committed and cooperated in pursuit of the mantra 'build an even stronger community with a shared future'. Applying an explanatory and descriptive approach, the study concludes that China's extensive engagement with the AU to promote infrastructure development and connectivity has profoundly impacted African economic growth. Finally, it goes without saying that the analytics, assessments and outcomes of the study would help future researchers, academia and experts working on China's economic engagements with the AU to rationally understand the impact of these relations.

KEYWORDS: Agenda 2063, Belt and Road Initiative, China-African Union Economic Relations, FOCAC, NEPAD

Introduction

As the China-Africa relationship continued to strengthen after the Cold War, the world expressed increasing interest and concerns over it. This relationship, characterized by China's adoption of inter-regional and intra-regional approaches in Africa, was not just a passing trend. It was a significant and enduring partnership, mutually beneficial and potentially impactful on global cooperation. The Chinese leader Mao Zedong, a key figure in modern history, was pivotal in establishing politico-economic relations with Africa after the civil war in China. He also supported the African liberation movement against colonial rule (Shinn, 2019a). China officially met heads of African states at the Afro-Asian conference held in Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955 (Phillips, 2016). Afterwards, on one side, China issued a loan of \$5 million to Egypt which move demonstrated the growing Chinese influence in the region whereas, on the other side, China demanded withdrawal of European powers from Africa which marked a significant shift in the global power dynamics (Shinn, 2019a). The African States gained multiple benefits through fair and equal bilateral agreements with China in different areas. The cheap Chinese goods earned high demand in African markets, including home appliances, stationery items, sporting goods, hardware, and agricultural machinery. China's pragmatic approach to Africa, which promoted working with

governments, regardless of ideology, produced repercussions in the early 1970s (Niu, 2016). China supported African states in defence and infrastructure projects. She constructed the Tanzania-Zambia railway, provided military assistance to the African countries which included arms transfer and training. China's aid from 1956 to 1976, a staggering \$2.4 billion, exceeded the aid of many other countries, demonstrating the scale of China's involvement, nevertheless, its trade with Africa, during the said period, did not increase significantly due to the dominance of colonial powers (Shinn, 2019a).

Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, played a crucial role in modernizing China's economy and shaping China's relations with Africa. In 1980, China restructured its economy, which resulted in a significant decrease in foreign trade. This decrease had a profound impact on China-Africa bilateral trade, which faced a persistent decline till 1990. Deng and other high-ranking officials visited Africa in 1982, engaged China with Africa, and subsequently neutralized the policy towards African states setting them free to choose the Soviet Union or China. Deng's leadership established the foundation of economic partnership, resulting in numerous projects and collaborative endeavours initiated in Africa (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012b; Taylor, 1998). Although Deng had to focus on domestic reforms and internal affairs, China-Africa economic cooperation strengthened during this rule, reflecting the evolving nature of their partnership. Gradually, China-Africa trade relations increased, and imports and exports from both sides improved. In the decade from 1980-1990, the exports from China to Africa consisted of food, industrial, animal, and chemical products. In 1989, President Jiang Zemin dealt with Tiananmen Square (China) issue skilfully while the West exploited the situation by criticizing the way in which these protests were handled (Shinn, 2019a), nevertheless, the open support from African heads of states, such as those from Namibia and Burkina Faso and the Angolan foreign minister, was a powerful testament to the strength of the China-Africa relationship. The North African states publically admitted that China's reaction was more legitimate. China and Africa came closer due to this African stance and China, in turn, extended generous financial assistance to the continent. Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War immediately resulted in withdrawal of Western donors from Africa, leaving an opportunity for China to increase its engagement thereby. Although China's aid was excessively small as compared to said donors, but it significantly supported Africa's development. China's aid to Africa in 1988 was approximately \$60 million, which was extended up to \$375 million in 1990 (Taylor, 1998) portraying its politico-economic interests in the region.

China-AU Interaction through FOCAC

In the 1990s, China increased its diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa. In 1991, the Chinese President Jiang Zemin proposed for strengthening Sino-African relations. He expanded the volume of aid and trade with Africa and China's aid had reached \$600 million at the end of his rule (Eom et al., 2018). He also promoted scholarship programs for African students studying in China. He announced five famous points during his visit to Africa in 1996 which included sincere friendship, non-interference, economic development, mutual respect, and cooperation (Aiping & Zeng, 2018). Due to his efforts, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 (Peter Pham, 2006) which has been a crucial platform to actively foster China-AU economic cooperation and trade relations through its various initiatives, such as regulating trade affairs, establishing investment forums, and arranging policy dialogues. The regular FOCAC meetings at various levels and venues provided a dynamic space for China-AU collaboration. For instance, the 2015 Summit and Conference in Johannesburg led to an agreement on a 2016-2018 action plan (FOCAC, 2015a), followed by a seventh ministerial session in Beijing in 2018. It is worth-noting that, during the first decade after the establishment of FOCAC, the China-Africa trade witnessed tremendous growth, improving from \$10.8 billion (2001) to \$150.3 billion (2011) (Gamache et al., 2013), with China becoming largest trading partner of Africa in 2009 (Albert, 2017). On the other hand, the total investment of China in Africa reached at a quantum of \$1 billion in 2010 (Siyu, 2011), turning Africa into the fourth-largest trading

partner of China. Another important factor is that, China has increased its high-quality exports, such as electro-medical products and heavy machinery, including automobiles since 2000 (Leepile, n.d.). These products, known for their reliability and advanced technology, contributed to the growth of China-AU trade. In 2021, the electromechanical products accounted for more than 45.4% of China's total exports to Africa (SCIO The People's Republic of China, 2021).

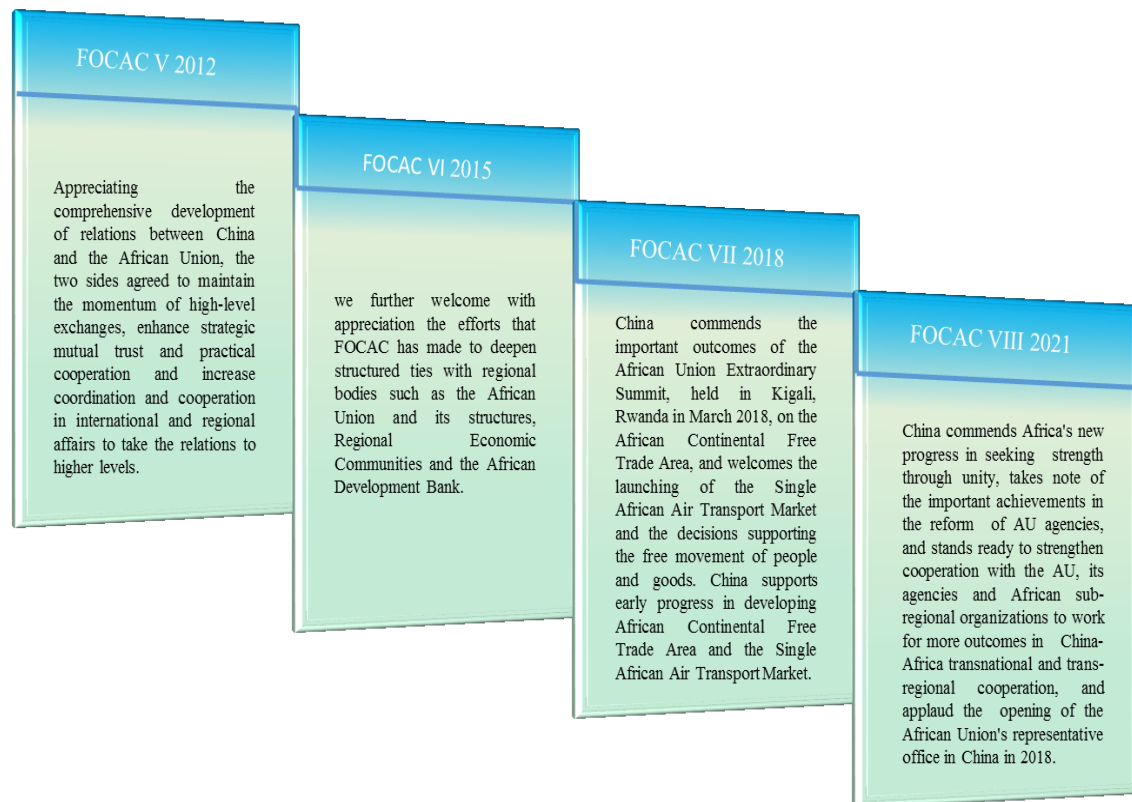


Fig. 1: Various FOCAC Declarations (2012-2021) as compiled by the researchers

The above figure presents a visual depiction of various FOCAC declarations during 2012 to 2021. These documents reflect China's strategic recognition of the AU and outline future pathways to support the AU's objectives. The figure also highlights the evolving role of the AU at both continental and intercontinental levels. It is worth-noting that the FOCAC Action Plan (2012-2015) was a significant milestone in China-AU relations which established several sub-committees to discuss regional strategies and decided to organise periodic continental FOCAC summits, thereby shaping the future of China-AU cooperation. The said Action Plan also highlighted China's consideration of the AU as a relevant African actor and its willingness to integrate the AU Commission (AUC) further in its strategy to promote a single African national entity (FOCAC, 2012). Furthermore, over the past 10 years, China's increased lending through FOCAC has been a significant boon to the African continent. These financial commitments have not only bridged the continent's wide infrastructure gap but also played a crucial role in promoting robust economic growth. The resulting benefits, including job creation, industrial development, and enhanced connectivity, underscore the effectiveness of FOCAC. The substantial contribution of the FOCAC to trade and investment growth between China and Africa, in fact, stamped the program's success (Frimpong, 2024).

The figure 2 below illustrates the Chinese participation in African development through various FOCAC programs.

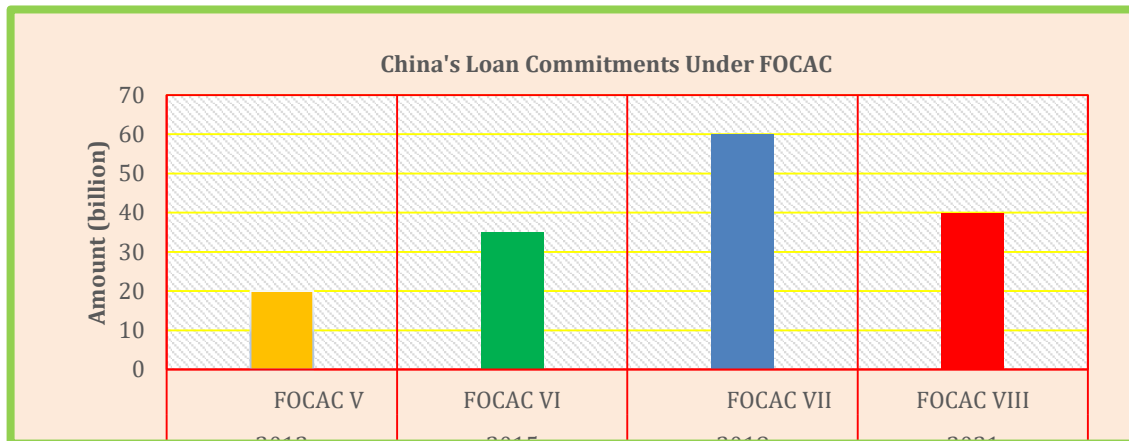


Fig:2 Source: (Frimpong, 2024; Munyati, 2024) Compiled by the researchers

The figure shows that the greatest amount of Chinese funding i.e. almost \$60 billion was provided through FOCAC VII of 2018 whereas the about \$40 billion amount provided through FOCAC VIII of 2021 was the second greatest funding.

It is also interesting to note that the Chinese President Hu Jintao (2013-2023), forged strategic partnership with African nations and paid four visits to fortify China-AU economic relations. During the FOCAC Beijing Summit of 2006 held in Egypt, Hu introduced China's Africa policy, emphasizing non-interference and cooperation. He also announced a valued \$1 billion loan facility to support small and medium-sized African enterprises (Shinn, 2019b). During the reign of Hu Jintao, aid to Africa significantly increased. As of 2007, it was \$1.4 billion in aid and debt relief (Brautigam, 2011). However, the scale of China's financial aid to African states was truly staggering. During 2010-2012, China provided \$14.4 billion in financial aid to 121 states out of which 51 were African states (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012a). Notably, fifty-two percent of this aid was received by Africa which amounted to almost \$2.5 billion per year during these three consecutive years. Hu oversaw a modest increase in China's aid to Africa, significantly impacting African economies. From 2003 to 2017, China participated in UN peacekeeping missions operating in Africa as well (Cho, 2019).

Multilateral Dynamics in China-AU Partnerships

A significant measure to strengthen the China-AU economic relations was the setting up of the China-Africa Development Fund in 2007, which had an initial deposit of \$1 billion to start functioning (China-Africa Development Fund, 2013). This fund further stimulated Chinese investments in Africa and brought a positive change. The increasing market potential and growing foreign direct investments in Africa are a testament to the mutual benefits of this relationship. For example, based on real GDP growth rate from 2000 to 2013, eight of the fifteen fastest-growing states were African during this period (Leke et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the ever-expanding China-AU economic and trade relations tapped into the continent's abundant natural resources which led to accelerated economic development in Africa which reality is evident by the shift in narrative of the economists from 'The Hopeless Continent' of 2000 to 'The Hopeful Continent' in 2011 (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012b). Keeping the foregoing facts into consideration, it might be recalled here that the Fifth FOCAC Ministerial Conference (2012) ratified some radical measures to strengthen mutual economic cooperation. China started implementing these measures in 2013 and approved a \$20 billion investment plan accordingly. It signed various agreements for loans in agriculture, infrastructure, and manufacturing sectors to promote the business at small and medium scales (Jin, 2015). The Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Africa in 2014 and announced an increased economic collaboration for infrastructure development to improve the African economy (Ministry of Commerce The People Republic of China, 2015).

Moving further, China, at the very start of Xi Jinping's government in 2013, focussed on the infrastructure development of Africa (OBE & Wallace, 2023). In the same year, he visited the AU and introduced the doctrines of "sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith (SCIO The People's Republic of China, 2020)," encompassing the theme "China and Africa are a community of common destiny." One year later, the China-Africa cooperation framework entitled "461 cooperation framework" was modified and presented by the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (Jin, 2015). This framework, named after the four principles and six focus areas, is a comprehensive plan that outlines the strategic direction and critical areas of China-AU cooperation, including infrastructure, trade, investment, agriculture, health, and people-to-people exchanges. Accordingly, the Chinese government successfully funded the AU's cross-regional Grand Inga Hydropower project, which was a landmark achievement in their relationship. The Chinese government's impressive role in expediting this project's funding and investment process, providing the maximum benefit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, underscores her commitment to African development (Jin, 2015). This project brought many opportunities for institutions, investors, organizations, relevant government bodies, investment banks, and multilateral organizations to participate in this investment from China in Africa [For a detailed study of these projects please go through "Raza, M. A. Khan, Dr. A. B. (2024). Role of China in Improving the Regional Connectivity and Economic Development in African Union through Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa-Priority Action Plan 1 (PIDA-PAP 1) (2012-2020)".

China's investment has been on a constant upward trajectory since the start of the 21st century, with a significant increase from \$200 million in 2000 to \$2.9 billion in 2011 (Busse et al., 2016) which gradually reached up to \$5 billion in 2021 (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.-b). In fact, Africa had emerged as a top choice for Chinese investors until 2021, with 10000 enterprises operating in various sectors, including agriculture, energy, catering, telecommunication, and manufacturing (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), 2021). Due to the significant increase in Chinese investment in Africa, the competition among enterprises has been very high. The analysis shows that there is a vast difference in business turnover and contract value. For example, revenue in 2001 was \$1.5 billion; in 2010, it reached about \$35.8 billion. In 2022, Chinese firms accounted for \$38 billion of African firms' engineering and construction projects. Therefore, in this year, the five countries—Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, Egypt, and DR Congo—contributed 41 percent of the total gross annual revenues generated by Chinese companies from construction projects across the African continent (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.-a). Presently, the project contracting market is an emerging field in which the maximum participation of Chinese investors (more than any other sector) turns Africa the 2nd largest project contracting market for Chinese investors (China-Africa Economic and Trade Promotion Council, 2023). This trend is beneficial for both actors. One has funding and industry; the other has abundant natural resources and a big market, including low-cost labour.

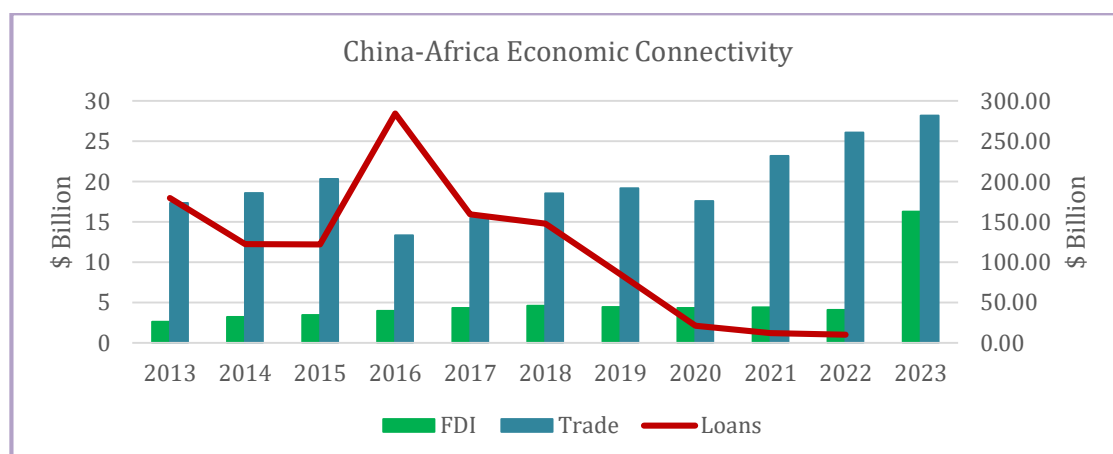


Fig 3: Source (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.-b; DiPLO, 2024; Wildsmith, 2024)

As the above chart illustrates, the bilateral trade between China and Africa has been on a consistent upward trajectory. Starting from \$173.68 billion in 2013, it steadily increased up till 2023. Even the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a temporary decline in this trend during 2020, did not significantly disrupt this volume. The trade rebounded in 2021 and continued to rise in 2022 and 2023, reaching at \$261 billion and \$282.1 billion, respectively (DiPLO, 2024). Noteworthy, in 2022, approximately 1,100 cooperation projects actively supported economic recovery of the AU after the COVID-19 pandemic (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union, 2022)

From 2013 to 2018, China expanded its foreign aid program by \$38.21 billion which was primarily distributed across three key categories: grants, concessional, and interest-free loans. This program had a profound impact on 53 African countries, with China providing 44.65% of the total financial assistance sanctioned under the said program to these countries. The trend of Chinese global foreign aid expenditures was on a steady rise from 2003 to 2015, increasing from \$631 million in 2003 to \$3.14 billion in 2015. However, there was a sharp drop in foreign aid expenditures reaching to \$2.37 billion in 2016, which decline was attributed to a recalibration of China's foreign aid plan in Africa (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Despite this, the aid expenditures have rebounded, reaching \$3.11 billion in 2022.

The Chinese FDI, also known as Overseas Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI), saw a fluctuating trend over the years. In 2013, it was \$3.37 billion, which was increased to \$5 billion in 2021, then dropped to \$1.81 billion in 2022, and further decreased to \$0.73 billion in 2023. Notably, in 2022, five out of fifty-five AU states, including Egypt, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, received the highest amount of FDI from China (Kawate & Tabeta, 2024). During the launch of a report on Chinese investment in Africa, Wang Dong, the Deputy Head of the ministry's Department of Western Asia and African Affairs, announced that China had made over \$1.8 billion of direct investment in Africa in the first half of 2023, a 4.4% increase from the previous year (Qingyun, 2023). In 2013, engineering and construction projects carried by Chinese companies in AU amounted to \$47.89 billion, which increased to \$55 billion in 2015, and then decreased to \$53 billion in 2016 (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.-b). In 2022, the gross annual revenues of projects from Chinese companies in Africa totalled \$37.84 billion. However, engineering and construction companies from China reported a total yearly revenue of \$37.84 billion in 2022 and \$55.46 billion in 2023. Chinese FDI touched its peak value of \$162.7 billion in 2023 (Wildsmith, 2024).

Emergence of China-AU Relationship

China's unwavering support in multilateral international forums and its staunch opposition to any Western attempts to impose restrictions or military interventions in African issues have been instrumental in the AU's development (Nantulya, 2023). The FOCAC Beijing Summit in 2006 and China's African Policy released in the same year further demonstrated China's firm support for the AU's mission to maintain peace, stability, harmony, and economic development in Africa. A significant development in the China-AU relationship occurred in 2008 and 2009 when two consecutive years of strategic dialogue were officially launched (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, 2008a; Lammich, 2014c). Recently, China has supported capacity-building initiatives in the African Union, including training programs for infrastructure development and peacekeeping operations in Somalia and Sudan. In coordination with the UN, China's deployment of peace troops in these regions has significantly contributed to maintaining peace and security. In 2015, China provided \$2.2 million to the AU as part of its partnership in maintaining peace and stability (African Union, 2015). China's peacekeeping operations also include training, equipment, and logistical support. China completed one of its most significant aid projects, the construction of the AU Conference Centre in Addis Ababa in 2012 (African Union, n.d.-b).

On the other hand, the African Union (AU), with its 55 members, is a continental organization aiming to address continental challenges. It officially succeeded the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 2002, a transition that marked a significant historical milestone (African Union, n.d.-a). The OAU, initially formed with 32 member states in 1963, was driven by the vision of Pan-Africanism, striving for unity among African nations (Quainoo, 2023). Its primary objectives included dismantling colonial rule, combating racial prejudices, fostering regional cooperation and promoting international collaboration. However, in 1999, African states recognized the limitations of OAU's effectiveness, which led to its conversion into AU (Ng, 2021). This change reflected the pressing call for African unity and the need for a more effective continental organization. Consequently, AU commenced its official operations in 2002 under the banner of "An Integrated, Prosperous, and Peaceful Africa." The AU's revised objectives emphasized strengthening internal stability in Africa and enhancing collaboration with international organizations (Mngomezulu, 2019)s. The AU operates as a fully functional institution with essential organs, dedicated councils, and comprehensive working plans.

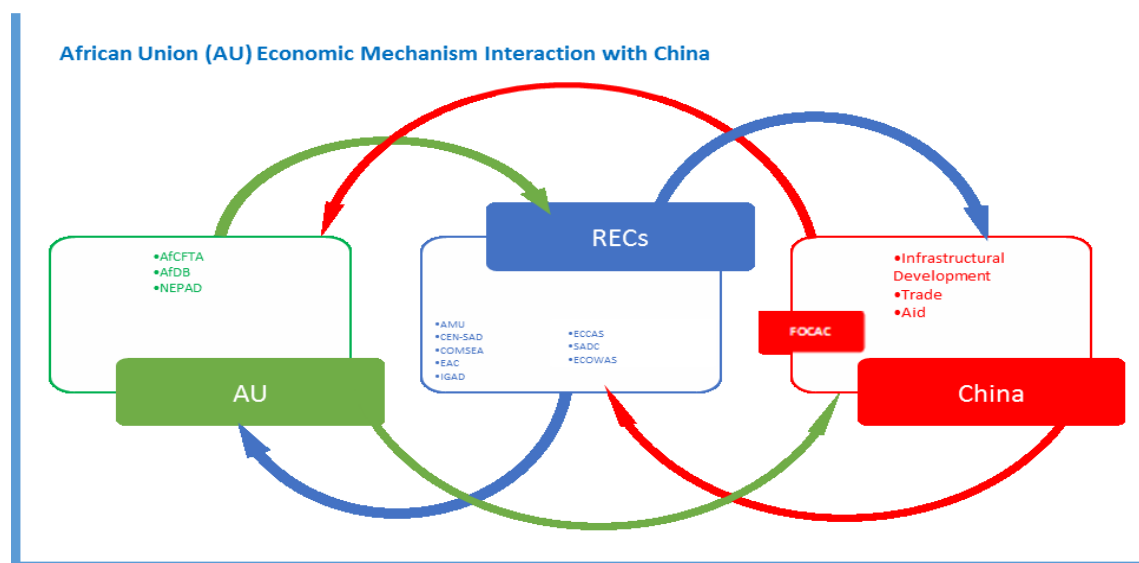


Fig: 4 (articulated by the researchers)

The above figure illustrates how China and the AU interact with each other through various bodies and sub-regional organizations. The detail of these eight organizations is as under:

- I. Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)
- II. Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD)
- III. Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)
- IV. East African Community (EAC)
- V. Arab Maghreb Union (UMA)
- VI. Southern African Development Community (SADC).
- VII. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)
- VIII. Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD)

As a continental organization, the AU's mission is to reshape Africa's landscape at regional and international levels particularly in the context of its relationship with China whereas China appreciates the AU's role in advancing continental integration and supports its dominant role in economic development role. China has established a constructive coordination with the AU and its firm support further strengthened peace and stability in the African continent. Moreover, China's engagements with the AU and the above-listed sub-regional organizations have a long history. In 2019, China formulated the China-AU Cooperation Commission, and by 2020, a significant investment of \$1.11 billion from 200

Chinese companies flowed towards Africa. It was a great milestone for the economic growth of the continent (Xinhuanet, 2021). The cooperation between the AU and China has elevated the AU's status as a significant global player in the modern world. Furthermore, the AU's ongoing efforts in infrastructure development are positioning the continent as an emerging economic hub.

China and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

The AU launched an economic development program, i.e. 'New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD),' at the 37th session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in 2001 in Lusaka, Zambia (African Union, 2006). The NEPAD actually comprised of two programs, the Millennium Africa Recovery Program (MAP) and the Omega Plan, designed for Africa's development with four core objectives: poverty eradication, women empowerment, integrated African involvement in the global economy, and promotion of sustainable development and growth. The NEPAD institutionalizes the African development network to cooperate with regional and international forums. A key role of NEPAD is to increase funding, investments, and capital flows. This program has significantly contributed to African development and has also been instrumental in promoting economic cooperation between China and Africa, thereby strengthening their mutual relationship (DIRCO, 2008). Africa prioritized some actions to cope with diseases and increased development in infrastructure, human resources, and agriculture utilizing the NEPAD program. Therefore, through its 2004 to 2006 action plan, China supported NEPAD and the AU (Omolo, 2022). China actually had decided to enhance cooperation with Africa by utilizing regional and multilateral organizations such as the AU and NEPAD; therefore, it reshaped its African Policy to achieve regional integration and, in 2006, a Chinese committee signed an MOU with NEPAD to strengthen cooperation and consultation (Lammich, 2014a). This year, China provided a significant amount of \$625 million to NEPAD's Pan-African Infrastructural Development Fund (PAIDF) with \$1.5 million aid in cash to train nurses and midwives (Custer et al., 2023; Dreher et al., 2022). Furthermore, the AU and the NEPAD established excessive mechanisms for promoting dialogue and collaborative activities (Lammich, 2014b). The first strategic dialogue at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa took place in 2007, where Zhai Jun, the then vice-secretary of foreign affairs, and Jean Ping, head of the African Union (AU), discussed China-AU partnership and some critical issues faced by Zimbabwe, Darfur, Somalia, and DR Congo (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, 2008b). The second strategic dialogue of 2009 (Beijing) focused on Chinese support for AU's peacekeeping missions and future capacity-building projects. The deputy foreign minister and an African representative from AUC led the Dialogue Mechanism (Lammich, 2019). In addition, according to the 2012 declaration, both sides highlighted the important role of the NEPAD in promoting African development and integration and applauded the cooperation between FOCAC and NEPAD (FOCAC, 2012).

The AGENDA 2063 & the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Since assuming office in 2012, President Xi Jinping has taken a more proactive stance regarding global policies, particularly those concerning Africa. At the end of 2012, the China-Africa Joint Economic and Trade Commission, consisting of 45 African states, was established, and an agreement with 32 African States was signed to protect the bilateral investments (The State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014). Moreover, China's launch of the BRI in 2013 paved the way for a new era of cooperation with the AU which aligned the objectives of its Agenda 2063 with the BRI to achieve economic growth and regional integration. It is worth-noting that, in 2013, the AU unveiled 'Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want' (Masanja, 2022) as part of its consolidation plans. In the same year, China launched the BRI to promote the 'Community of Common Destiny for Mankind' (Gummi et al., 2020). The Agenda 2063 is AU's fifty-year strategic plan which aims to transform the African continent by maintaining peace, political stability, and economic development through regional integration, infrastructure development and industrialization. In addition,

under BRI, China's global development strategy, focuses on trade enhancement and establishing investment linkages by building infrastructure across Asia, Europe, and Africa. This initiative boosts economic cooperation, creates trade routes and constructs road-railway networks and ports. Both programs are strategically aligned and part of each other, which provides a sense of security about the effectiveness of the cooperation (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) People's Republic of China, 2021b). One depends on the other to achieve the required targets. Since Africa is an integral part of the BRI hence China is continuously engaged with AU in promoting continental integration and advancing regional infrastructure development projects.

A pivotal development in this regard occurred at sixth FOCAC Summit 2015 in Johannesburg, where China pledged to provide \$60 billion for development projects (Sun, 2015). The African AUC participated in the FOCAC Summit 2018 in Beijing wherein China admired the AU Extra-Ordinary Summit (2018) held in Kigali for the launch of Single African Air Transport and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). China promised to support both initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). In 2021, China and the AUC signed an MoU for increased cooperation with respect to the BRI projects (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) People's Republic of China, 2021a). In the same year, several Chinese departments along with the AUC attended the first meeting on the joint implementation of BRI, titled 'China-AU Coordination Mechanism' in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). China has, in fact, aligned itself with the AU's strategic objectives and, with their mutual respect and shared goals, both parties are committed to working together on joint objectives to 'build an even stronger community with a shared future' (Anshan et al., 2012). This commitment showcases the strength of their partnership.

China-AU Economic and Trade Cooperation

In 2014, during a visit to the AU, the Prime Minister of China, Mr. Li Keqiang, advanced a proposal to 'connect up' Africa via regional roads, aviation, and high-speed rail networks. In this regard, an agreement of funding \$2 billion was signed between the People's Bank of China (PBOC) and the African Development Bank (AfDB), to co-finance the Africa Growing Together Fund (AGTF) (African Development Bank, 2014). This funding was fixed for ten years to support the development projects (Pegels et al., 2018). In January 2015, the AU and China signed an agreement to build railways, roads, and airports to link the capital cities of all 54 African countries. Moreover, since Egypt was strategically vital for the Maritime Silk Road and controlled the Suez Canal, which linked Asia and Europe, therefore, China has worked upon numerous projects in Egypt. It included contribution of up to \$15 billion in financing for developing the country's new administrative capital (Gummi et al., 2020).

The AfCFTA was launched in July 2019 to promote inter-regional trade and integration of the continent (African Union, 2024). It provides opportunities to both the Chinese and their AU counterparts to excel in multilateral economic and trade cooperation. The China's Ministry of Commerce and the AfCFTA Secretariat formed the joint working forum named 'Economic Cooperation Expert Group Mechanism', where China is fully engaged in supporting the development of AfCFTA. Moreover, China's Special Economic Zones (SEZ's) in Africa, designed to focus on African domestic markets and encourage agro-industrial processing, could play the role of a game-changer in the progress of the continent (Alden et al., 2021) by improving the functionalization of AfCFTA. The FOCAC Summit 2021 also stressed over the cooperation in trade, using the AfCFTA as the basis for a broader engagement (Alden et al., 2021). Accordingly, two China-Africa Economic Cooperation Expert Group meetings were convened in May and November 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). As a result of these improved mechanisms, China's direct investment in Africa soared to over \$162.7 billion in 2023 (Wildsmith, 2024) which is a testament to China's confidence in Africa's economic potential and its

commitment to fostering sustainable growth in the region. In this context, the \$400 million loan agreement signed in August 2023 between China Development Bank and the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) to support African Small-and-Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) was a promising step. Furthermore, the China-AU cooperation in infrastructure developmental projects is coherent with the AU's Agenda 2063, which seeks to catalyse industrial development and economic diversification in Africa (Carslake, 2024). The SEZs, a vital part of this strategy, are significantly promoting sustainable economic growth and development across the continent. China's involvement in these zones reflects its commitment to strengthening economic ties with Africa and supporting its development goals (Alden & Gu, 2021). The AU organized annual symposiums in coordination with the Africa Economic Zones Organization (AEZO) to establish a collective forum to unite different stakeholders on a single platform to discuss the contribution of SEZ's (African Union, 2022b). The AUC has developed a handbook on SEZs in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) to identify issues and opportunities aiming to assist AfCFTA (UNCTAD, n.d.). This concerted effort represents the potential of SEZs to sustainably drive Africa's economic growth. Although these SEZs are not a designated organ of the AU but they constitute a vital part of the AU's economic strategy hence the Union is playing its role in establishing these zones. Like Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), the partnership of the AU with the Africa Economic Zones Organization (AEZO) is very significant. The 38 out of 55 AU member countries have 237 SEZs whereas many others are passing through the planning and construction stages (UNCTAD, 2021).

Since the vision of AU under Agenda 2063 is "Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa," hence the AU strides toward excellence through promoting harmony and peace and establishing economic institutions. It quite successfully integrated the region through the launch of the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), increased the trade through the AfCFTA, initiated projects under the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), and established Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to excel progress towards continental integration (AfDB, n.d.; African Union Commission, 2021; Tralac, 2024). The AU basically aspires to "Unity of Purpose" for its efforts in building peace, addressing public health emergencies, and investing in continental public health institutions to cope with diseases like Ebola and the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, it built enormous health institutions such as African Medicine Agency and Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (African Union, 2023). During the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, a detailed communiqué released by the AU expressing support for China's anti-pandemic efforts, which marked the very first occasion in history that any organization and an entire continent offered such explicit support to China (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union, 2022). The AU also promoted culture to achieve sustainable development goals of empowering women and while taking initiatives to promote gender equality, the Union dedicated the 2020-2030 decade to the financial and economic inclusion of the African women. The Union strengthened African unity by promoting homogeneity in culture, heritage, and ethics, bringing commonalities and mitigating societal differences (African Union, 2022a).

China-AU Development Initiatives

China's increased engagements with the AU and its sub-regional economic communities are not just a matter of quantity but also of strategic importance. It was evident in President Xi Jinping's announcement to provide the AU with \$100 million in military aid at the UN Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping held in September 2015 (Xinhuanet, 2021). The aid was actually intended to operationalize the African Standby Force (ASF) and African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) (Tay, 2023). In August 2022, China publicly endorsed the AU's aspiration to secure permanent representation in the G20 (Yu & Zong, 2022) which, consequently, was conferred in 2023 (Acharya & Singh, 2023). This move underscores China's commitment to Africa's global representation and growing role

in international diplomacy. Furthermore, China, through fibre optic marine cables is connecting Africa worldwide as well as interconnecting all African regions by laying an integrated fibre optic cable network. Huawei, a major player in the global technology industry, has a significant presence in Africa. It operates in 40 African countries and has forged partnerships with multiple governments to implement projects for establishing data centres (Olewe, 2019). It has, in fact, been instrumental in developing fifty per cent of 3G and seventy per cent of the 4G telecommunication infrastructure and networks across the AU (Wright, 2020). This digital advancement in Africa is a technological leap and a beacon of hope for the state's socio-economic development. Furthermore, in 2015, the AUC and the National Development and Reform Commission of China signed an MoU for the African integrated high-speed train network (AIHSRN) which, as a flagship project of Agenda 2063, enhance connectivity and economic development in Africa (African Union, 2022a). China's extensive engagement with the AU to promote infrastructure development has profoundly impacted African economic growth. Her involvement in constructing several railway projects in Africa over the last decade has been significant [Note: for a detailed analysis of similar China's initiatives please go through the study: "Raza, A., & Khan, A. B. (2024). *Understanding the Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) over the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA)(2013-2023)*. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(2), 758-781. Moreover, China's commitment to human resource development in Africa is evident in establishing several regional vocational education centres and capacity-building colleges. These initiatives have collectively trained 200,000 technicians for African countries and provided the continent with 40,000 training opportunities in China (China Daily, 2015).

China has also taken many initiatives to improve food security in Africa. For that purpose, in the FOCAC third Summit (Johannesburg) of 2015, China announced \$60 billion investment in agriculture sector (FOCAC, 2015b). It pledged to carry out agricultural development projects in 100 African villages to raise rural living standards, agreed to send 30 teams of agricultural experts to Africa, and established a "10+10" cooperation mechanism for research in seed breeding, improvement of poultry and livestock, pest and disease control and treatment, as well as epidemic prevention and control, in order to enhance agricultural productivity and value-addition in agro-production between Chinese and African Agricultural Research Institutes (Buckley et al., 2017). Moreover, China has signed 31 agreements with 20 African states and regional organizations for agricultural cooperation (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Lesotho, 2015). The 1st China-Africa Agriculture Cooperation Forum of 2019 established the China-AU Agriculture Cooperation Commission and the China-Africa Cooperation Programme to promote technology transfer, invest in agribusiness projects, and exchange knowledge to modernize agriculture. As a result, the FDI stock in African agriculture, worth \$1.11 billion, was contributed by over two hundred Chinese entities across thirty-five African states. This investment covers a wide range of activities, including breeding, planting, and processing, and has led to the trading of over 350 agricultural products with China, thereby boosting China-Africa agricultural trade (Mingxin, 2021). China and AU collaborations in this context have been significant, such as offering scholarships through the Alliance of International Science Organizations in the Belt and Road Region Scholarship projects. The year 2023 saw Africa emerging as the world's second-fastest-growing continent, with an impressive annual growth rate of 3.1% (African Development Bank, 2024). The collective economy of Africa, which reached \$3 trillion in 2023, is a magnificent manifestation of the effectiveness of China-AU cooperative framework (Lu, 2024) since, during the same year, China remained the largest trading partner of the AU with a partnership figure of \$282.1 billion (DiPLO, 2024).

It would be quite unfair not to mention the weighty contribution of Chinese Banks, the principal portfolio holders of Chinese investments in Africa, in extensively supporting AU's continental integration projects like PIDA and a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, roads, telecommunication, energy resources, infrastructure and livelihood

improvement projects (Custer et al., 2023; Dreher et al., 2022). The People's Bank of China, China Development Bank, Export-Import (Exim) Bank of China, and China-Africa Development Fund are major Chinese financial institutions which provided loans and credits to African countries (Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), n.d.). During 2000 to 2014, these financial institutions and governments lent a staggering amount of over \$86 billion to Africa. The Chinese Banks are currently providing finance for an impressive 186 projects across Africa (Albert, 2017). These loans and investments have had direct and positive impact, creating over 47000 job opportunities in Africa and offering a beacon of hope for the continent's future. The Chinese development banks provided \$23 billion for African infrastructure between 2007 and 2020, which is an extra-ordinary higher amount when compared with \$9.1 billion from all other development banks (Haar, 2023).

Conclusion

The increased diplomatic and economic engagements of China within the AU during the 1st quarter of the 21st century have been evident from the foregoing details which also reveal Chinese interest and priorities towards the African continent. It is now quite obvious that the AU's ongoing efforts in infrastructure development with the help of huge Chinese investments and the consequent boost in the economy of the region have elevated the AU's status as an emerging economic hub in the modern world. Although the African continent has been the focus of attention of Chinese foreign policy since far past but the role of Chinese Presidents Mr. Hu Jin Tao and Mr. Xi Jinping has been quite significant in developing strong relationship with the AU during the 21st century. The China's global development strategy under BRI focuses on trade enhancement and establishing investment linkages by building infrastructure across various regions including South Asia, Central Asia and the African continent but this project has actually been proved a blessing for the AU as, so far, the maximum benefits of the said initiative are being enjoyed by the AU due to its distinct geopolitical, geostrategic and economic significance and the initiative has radically transformed the economic structure of the whole continent. The Agenda 2063 of the AU is actually framed to materialize and maximize the potential benefits of China's BRI. Both China and the AU having blessed with excessive human and material resources are coming closer to each other because of their emerging economic and strategic needs. The other major global powers like United States, Russia, UK are not competent to compete with China in terms of extending influence and penetration into the AU because these powers are not blessed with matching capabilities hence it might be observed quite safely that the China-AU economic alliance would further thrive in the times to come.

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